

VZCZCXRO4986
PP RUEHAO
DE RUEHCV #0113/01 0181751
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 181751Z JAN 06
FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2781
INFO RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 5826
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 5073
RUEHBS/AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS PRIORITY 0321
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 0960
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 1523
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 9724
RUEHLI/AMEMBASSY LISBON PRIORITY 1246
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0366
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID PRIORITY 2977
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 3501
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0270
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 1594
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME PRIORITY 0504
RUEHSN/AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR PRIORITY 0756
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 3211
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE PRIORITY 0739
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO PRIORITY 0526
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL PRIORITY 0227
RUEHMI/USOFFICE FRC FT LAUDERDALE PRIORITY 2756
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA PRIORITY 0388

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CARACAS 000113

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

HQSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD
FRC FT LAUDERDALE FOR CLAMBERT
DEPT PLEASE PASS TO AID/OTI RPORTER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/13/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: VENEZUELA'S OPPOSITION LOOKS FOR A FUTURE

REF: A. 05 CARACAS 02603

- [1](#)B. CARACAS 00040
- [1](#)C. 05 CARACAS 03076
- [1](#)D. 05 CARACAS 03713

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) After basking in its self-perceived moral victory following the low turnout in the December 4 legislative elections and international observers' calls for a new National Electoral Council, the opposition is trying to figure out how to stay relevant and position themselves for the presidential elections considering that they have no representation in the National Assembly. On December 13, several opposition leaders gathered to consider their next steps. Not surprisingly it appears they came up with no comprehensive strategy. Post offers its thoughts on options that are beginning to emerge: internal reflection, forming competing organizations, provoking President Chavez into missteps, appealing to the international community, and negotiating with the government to obtain the most transparent conditions possible for the 2006 presidential race. Given that traditional opposition parties, such as Accion Democratica, believe abstaining from the election has given them new life, it is unlikely that most of the traditional opposition will take advantage of this time to renovate itself. End summary.

¶2. (C) A little over a week after the National Assembly election, opposition leaders began to face the difficult question of what to do now that they have shut themselves out of national government. On December 13, Enrique Mendoza, former leader of the defunct Coordinadora Democratica, hosted a meeting with representatives from several opposition parties, including Accion Democratica (AD), Primero Justicia (PJ), Movement Toward Socialism (MAS), Social Democrats (Copei), Proyecto Venezuela, and Alianza Bravo Pueblo to discuss next steps. Former CD spokesman Pompeyo Marquez privately told poloff there is general interest in working with the GOV to try to improve transparency for next year's presidential election, but no concrete plan on how to do so or on how to keep party support bases motivated for the vote. Post offers below its take on trends that appear to be developing.

The Most Effective

¶3. (C) Renovation: PJ has said it will hold elections in the first quarter of 2006 to revalidate its leadership and called on its fellow opposition parties to do the same. The election may exacerbate divisions within the party, however. There has been an ongoing power struggle within the PJ leadership (ref a) for some time. In addition, board members began disagreeing about where to target future political outreach in the run up to the December 4 legislative election

CARACAS 00000113 002 OF 004

. Secretary General Gerardo Blyde, former PJ deputy Liliana Hernandez, and Jose Ramon Medina advocated for more development with PJ's yuppie base, while PJ President Julio Borges, Baruta borough mayor Henrique Capriles, and former Secretary General Jose Luis Mejias advocated for greater

SIPDIS
outreach to the poor, Chavez's traditional base of support.

¶4. (C) MAS, which has seen its political influence steadily decline since its split from Chavez in 2001, is the only other party reportedly considering this option. MAS President Felipe Mujica told local newspaper El Universal the party will undergo unspecified reform to fit the country's new reality. These reforms may go farther than Mujica expects as a local press report indicates a faction within MAS plans to petition the Supreme Court (TSJ) to force the party to hold elections. Mujica's potential challenger, the openly pro-Chavez Jose Luis Meza, has also proposed forming four committees to oversee the party's rebuilding.

¶5. (C) Separately, AD recently reconfirmed its current leadership after supporters of Secretary General Henry Ramos Allup undermined rival Luis Emilio Rondon's plans to challenge him in the internal elections, originally scheduled for last October. Rondon, a 40-something year old member of AD's National Executive Committee, petitioned the TSJ to suspend internal elections in order to give the party time to update its membership roster to facilitate a fair election. AD leadership agreed to abide by the TSJ decision to postpone the election by a month but then blocked Rondon from running, citing internal party rules designed to favor Ramos Allup's cronies. AD has traditionally received complaints that it stifled the advance of new, young leadership, but has worked hard to keep its internal divisions out of public view.

A Different But Problematic Approach

¶6. (C) Forming Competing Organizations: In mid-October Sumate, an NGO and not a political party, acting on behalf of

several civil society organizations, announced the establishment of a Federal Congress to Promote and Defend the Democratic System, which would essentially serve as a shadow legislature. Jimmy Ross-Jones, an NGO coordinator involved in coordinating the congress, told poloff the group would focus on proposals to address pressing social problems, such as respect for human rights, health care, education, and poverty. (Note: These themes are at the top of the National Assembly's agenda as well (ref b).) Sumate's Roberto Abdul told poloff in December that congresses had been established in several states including, Miranda, Carabobo, and Zulia; and their goal is to have operations in about seventeen states before setting up a national body this spring.

17. (C) This strategy mirrors Chavez's own general approach to create new and parallel structures to existing institutions and it provides a much needed space from which an alternative political platform could arise. Still, it is a risky proposal. The organization's structure is very similar to the AN and many of its proposals will likely be perceived as a direct challenge to a government that is hyper-sensitive to criticism. We understand several member organizations have already become targets of GOV pressure and this intimidation will likely increase. Moreover, if successful, organization members may be squeezed by

CARACAS 00000113 003 OF 004

opposition parties not wanting to be upstaged by more effective competition.

18. (C) Provoking Chavez into Missteps: The week after the legislative election, GOV officials, including Vice President Rangel, citing the 1965 Political Participation Law, began threatening to declare "illegal" opposition parties that did not participate in the election. PJ's Mejias told poloff that his party hoped the government would do so to highlight its anti-democratic ways. In a show of bravado, AD's Ramos Allup publicly challenged the government to do so as well. The GOV has since backed away from that threat, suggesting it may be considering the negative publicity it would receive by banning the most prominent opposition parties.

19. (C) The government may also not need provocation. The National Assembly will be considering some bills this term, such as the Citizen Power Law (ref b), that may narrowly define political parties and significantly restrict their activities, providing future opportunities for clashes between the opposition and GOV. The legislature also plans to introduce laws, such as an education bill, which reportedly could represent a major new intrusion by the government into private and church schools, which in turn might provoke substantial negative public reaction. In addition, continued complaints about the failure of the main road to the airport may keep the GOV on the defensive as well. Most opposition leaders have been slow to seize on this last issue--possibly out of fear their own parties may also be blamed for past negligence--but this may change now that presidential contender Julio Borges (PJ) has recently begun to take advantage of this opportunity to criticize the GOV. The opposition's efforts to make this a political issue hinge in part on the economic and other dislocations the bridge collapse will occasion; those effects are only now beginning to become clear.

The Most Likely

10. (C) Appealing to the International Community: On December 14 opposition leaders, led by Enrique Mendoza, met with the diplomatic corps to explain the reasons for the opposition's pullout of the December 4 legislative elections. Mendoza announced plans for similar meetings and monthly status reports to update the diplomatic corps on its status and future plans. He also said the group will present the long-promised report detailing the fraud they allege occurred

during the 2004 referendum (ref c). The report was not released last year to prevent discouraging voter participation in the municipal and legislative elections. The relatively low turnout for the meeting compared to similar meetings in 2004 which drew dozens of diplomats suggests international fatigue with the opposition has probably set in and this strategy is unlikely to succeed.

¶11. (C) Negotiation: Following the recommendations of the OAS and EU's preliminary observation reports, several government, opposition, and religious leaders have proposed a national dialogue. During the December 14 meeting with the diplomatic corps, PJ's Blyde said his party would participate only if the GOV sets a concrete agenda--unlike in previous efforts where the government drifted into abstract discussion about its "revolution"--leading with a discussion of

CARACAS 00000113 004 OF 004

replacing the National Electoral Council. The GOV has said it will not accept "preconditions" for dialogue. Calls for a national dialogue are typically raised following an electoral event, but these talks have rarely led to any significant political progress. In fact, when the GOV has publicly raised this idea it has usually driven deeper divisions within the opposition.

Comment: No Lessons Learned

¶12. (C) Instead of sparking the regeneration of a new cadre of opposition leaders as hoped (ref d), it seems that, for now, the boycott of the December 4 legislative elections and the criticism in the OAS and EU's preliminary reports are allowing the opposition to continue blaming other factors than the themselves for their own problems within the Venezuelan political structure. As a result, the traditional opposition appears to be continuing to resort to the same stale thinking that has only exacerbated the current political situation. PJ may be taking a risk in holding internal elections, but it will be worth it if it results in a stronger, credible political alternative. The economic and political fallout from the bridge collapse directly challenges the GOV's ability to govern and may be an important harbinger for the opposition's future by becoming either an issue on which the traditional opposition parties launch their comeback, or a sign of their profound weakness, if they are unable to channel discontent in their direction. This cable covers the traditional opposition parties, but there are some new parties, such as Venezuela de Primero, that appear to be trying to develop a different political approach, as well as possible fractures within the government coalition. Post will take a more in-depth look at these developments in the coming months.

BROWNFIELD